

HELLO, DARKNESS:
The Collected Poems of
L. E. Sissman
 Atlantic-Little, Brown,
 1978, 313 pp. \$9.95
 L of C 78-54091
 ISBN 0-316-79311-6

*L. E. Sissman wakes at dawn,/ Showers, shaves,
 calls William Shawn/ (Busy), boards his motor
 bike,/ Stops at a truck stop truckies like.*

Why the terse staccato rhyme? Poet running out of time. Advertising executive and *Atlantic* columnist Sissman (he added that extra syllable to his name in the lines quoted) contracted Hodgkins disease in 1965; modern medicine could give him only a decade more. His poetry and preoccupations matured instantly: silence and small things, hospitals, parties, sunlight, friends, embalmed moments snatched from time—these are his staples. John Updike found an “antic exactitude” in Sissman’s work. Others have compared him to T. S. Eliot or Ogden Nash. Perhaps more people would read poetry if more poets wrote like Sissman in—to take another example—“Concerto for the Left Hand Alone” (for cartoonist Charles Saxon):
Late, late, when BAI played Wittgenstein/ Interpreting Ravel, one hand behind/ Him in the First World War, I thought of you—/ The hand that waited and the hand that drew/ My gauche hand drawing on the drawing pad,/ A sinister, undextrous fiddler-crab/ Claw caught and fixed in the links of your hand,/ Left high and dry ashore upon the sand/ Of a lost world where all is withershins,/ And every left hand sidles for its sins.

THE MIDDLE PARTS OF
FORTUNE: Somme and
Ancre, 1916
 by Frederic Manning
 St. Martin’s, 1977
 (released 1978)
 247 pp. \$8.95
 L of C 77-72368
 ISBN 0-312-53185-0

This memoir-novel of World War I trench life was first published anonymously in England by London poet-essayist Frederic Manning in 1929, thirteen years after he survived the Battle of the Somme as a private. It was hailed as a masterpiece by Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, T. E. Lawrence, and Ernest Hemingway (who excerpted it for his 1942 *Men at War* anthology). It is full of the talk and look of the men in and out of the trenches: “There is a gulf between men just returned from action and those who have not . . . as unbridgeable as that between the sober and the drunk.” Manning’s nominal hero is Lance Corporal Bourne, an educated chap who resists pressures to go to officer school, lives through the Somme, and dies, finally, hit by a stray German bullet during a